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THE INFLUENCE OF DEMOCRACY UPON RELIGION

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During the last five hundred years there has been taking place throughout the world a fundamental revolution in government,—first as to its actual condition, and secondly as to its theory; for that and not the reverse is always the order of development. Up to that time in each community the mass of people, with rare exceptions, had been governed by a few, with one man at their head. The change, which came slowly, consisted in the rise of the governed from passive acquiescence into active participation, the recognition of this as rightful, and the growth of ability among the people for governing. This up-swelling tide, surging everywhere, has been defined by one of its ablest exponents as “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

According to this theory government arises out of the people. It is not a system imposed on them *ab extra*, which they must accept whether they like it or not, and to which their only duty is obedience. It is founded in their own hearts, minds, wills. Instead of being their master who takes them by the shoulder and makes them walk in the path, whether wisely or unwisely, prescribed, a governor is their agent, whose business is appointed by them and whom they intrust with its execution. Rulers are therefore, on this theory, not autonomous but representative, with powers limited and defined. Government becomes more or less constitutional, with arbitrariness more or less eliminated. There is established a responsibility of the governors to the source of their power—the governed; and government becomes not only of the people but by the people.

It is also for the people. Their welfare is the only object it may legitimately have. Undemocratic government has always aimed at furthering the interests either of a class or of an institution. The pomp and wealth of kings or of their nobles, and the

comfort of those who could rise above their fellows, were accepted by high and low alike as the natural objects of government. Or all interests were subordinated to the advancement of the ruling family, the State, the Church, of the institution, whatever it was, which wielded the machinery of government. The individual as such had no or few rights. He existed for the sake of the institution. Democracy, on the other hand, holds that institutions exist for the sake of individuals; that the welfare of all men and every man is the only legitimate object of human society, and that government therefore must be not only of the people and by the people but for the people.

Such a shifting of the centre of gravity in the State has of course had a profound influence upon the Church; for the upper and the nether springs are fed from the same source. Heaven and earth react upon each other. We are told that in the beginning God made man in His own image. History shows that men ever since have been making God in their own image; that is, men have always attributed to their gods the conditions which seemed to them the highest. Where brute power has held sway, some Baal-embodiment of force has been worshipped. Where the indulgence of appetite has been a thing to be envied, Bacchus and Venus in low forms or in high have been in the Pantheon. The impress of the Roman Empire upon early Christianity was profound. Under it God became a magnified emperor, dealing out arbitrary rewards and punishments, while the Atonement was a legal contract between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. Every rise in civilization has gone on and registered itself in men's conception of God. So mighty a current of thought as the swing towards democracy in government must therefore have had a profound influence upon theology and upon the constitution of the Church.

This influence has been by no means wholly beneficial; for democracy has brought with it the defects of its excellences. In its recognition of the worth of each individual there lies a tendency to blur distinctions, and so to lower all moral judgments to a level. The yawning valleys of human evil are obligingly exalted, and the mountainous standards of righteousness are made conveniently low. The eternal hostility between right and wrong

tends to melt away in a kindly tolerance, and the problem of sin to have little interest for such theology as remains. An easy-going optimism insists that there is no such thing as permanent loss, since God is too amiable to hurt anybody. I am not sure but the Church has aided this tendency by sounding too exclusively that key-note of the Gospel—"God is Love." It is indeed the key-note, and it is a veritable gospel to those who can understand it. But to those whose ideal of love is low, it is likely to mean the easy-going good nature they have seen in indulgent parents or little-demanding friends. It is the tragedy of great phrases that their very greatness by making them common makes them outworn. They need translation in order to be freshened, brightened, sharpened. So we must set forth love's highly demanding nature, its sternness, its moral passion, or else we must cease to take for granted that the glory of the gospel will be apprehended when we sum it up in "God is Love."

It is but a different aspect of this same democratic tendency—to regard one thing as equally good with another—when we see that the religion inspired by it lays little emphasis upon any imperative. If every man's opinion has a right to existence, there is no need for authority, indeed there is no such thing as authority. Why have recourse to specialists when every man knows enough to get along? An absolute, an eternal, a "Thou shalt," the mind taught by democracy has become almost incapable of hearing. What it needs is the message of the prophet Ezekiel: "Go, get thee unto the children of thy people and speak unto them and tell them, Thus saith the Lord God!" Do we ask what else he was to say? Nothing; that was the whole of it. A bookful of details indeed follows; but they were all summed up and embodied in this one message—that there is a God, whose word is imperative. Such a recognition of ultimate authority is what the scientific tendency of the last half-century has been insisting upon in its inculcation of reverence for the fact. It is what the easy popular religion of the day tends to smile upon lightly. Democracy may be right in insisting that the abode of this ultimate authority is not outside men's mind and soul but is within it; and theology is certainly right in insisting that being within the soul, it is none the less of God. But both unite in solemnly

declaring that it is of vital importance to all men that they should acknowledge an imperative and know that there is a God in Israel.

Democracy claims that the ultimate authority in government is of the people. This has therefore lent strength to the claim for religion that it is immanent, that is, having its base in the heart and mind of humanity. It is true that the doctrine of the immanence of God was enunciated by the Alexandrine theologians long before democracy appeared as a force in the world. But the time then was not ripe for it, and it disappeared for a thousand years, except to the discerning few, under the dominant fervor of transcendence and Augustinianism. But at the Renaissance democracy and immanence shyly emerged and went hand in hand. Religion came then to be regarded less as a system handed down from above than as an ideal towards which the thoughts and desires of men were up-reaching. Even in the heart of the Church in the early centuries there had dwelt the recognition of the human soul as the cave from which issued divine oracles. The Bible was guaranteed by the Church. The Church was the blessed company of all faithful people. The test of truth was, "*Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*" For a long time, however, this inward revelation was regarded as no revelation at all in the proper sense of the word, but as a realm of wholly human knowledge distinct from knowledge divinely given. The latter, Revelation properly so called, came wholly from without and was guaranteed by the Church, according to the Roman Catholics; by the Bible, according to the Protestants. The realm of inward revelation had no standing with the orthodox, but was held to be either opposed to revealed truth or to be a separate sphere wholly apart from it. It is only within the last half-century that these have been recognized as not two but one. Revelation and discovery are but different aspects of the same process. When we emphasize the human agency in the coming of truth to the soul, we call it discovery; when we emphasize the divine agency, we call it revelation; and both statements are correct.

The thought of our time, scientific, literary, theologic, cannot be understood unless we recognize not only the divine and the human but the divine in the human. If God made man in his

own image, then the spirit in man is, as the Hebrew poet said, the candle of the Lord; and the light it sheds is part of the incarnate Light of the world. Democracy has been in this respect a John the Baptist, preparing the way for the dispensation of the spirit. Out of the heart of the Hebrew monarchy rose this vision of a democracy which should be both human and divine. "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit."

When we ask next whether the condition of religion today shows any influence of democracy's second doctrine—that government must be by the people—we are confronted with a remarkable change from early times. Religion was then almost wholly the affair of a class. Those only administered religion, spoke for it, concerned themselves with it, who were certified by its agent, the Church; or if others attempted these functions, they were cast out as heretics or schismatics. But today it is those who claim an exclusive patent on religion who are themselves on trial. The spirit of democracy refuses to recognize any one ecclesiastical system as possessing exclusive right of way. On every side there have arisen bodies claiming orthodoxy, apostolicity, legitimacy; and the spirit of our age looks on indulgently and only smiles when one of them gets angry with the others and refuses to play. Instead of councils of clergy to settle church affairs, we have great conferences and movements by laymen. We hear lamentations that the authority of the clergy has declined. They are no longer looked to as the sources of light and knowledge, and their word when uttered is likely to be treated as of little weight. The moving forces of the religious world today are not only in the pulpit but also in the newspaper and the magazine.

This is a melancholy spectacle for those who regard the Church as the only agent of God in the world, and who tend to identify the Church with the clergy. Sometimes the endeavor is made to amend the situation by exalting the minister of religion as a priest. But the effort accomplishes little; not, as might be

claimed for it, because the ideal is high, but because in fact it is not high enough. For the type of priesthood thus set up is that of Aaron, where the priest belongs to a tribe apart from his fellows, and his functions consist in performing acts of ceremonial. Such, the Epistle to the Hebrews assures us, is too low an ideal of priesthood for the uplifting of the world. That which is needed is a priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, which is not based on genealogic descent, since it is without father, without mother; and whose functions are not primarily ritual but reside in kingship in righteousness and kingship in peace. Wherever today there is a minister of religion with a message, one who is a Melchizedek, an authority in righteousness, who can illustrate it and draw men to it; one who is king of Salem, a master of peace, who can lead men to the still waters of divine comfort,—there are hungry souls waiting for him. Priesthood such as this, after the order of Melchizedek, based upon character, our age welcomes with reverence and obedience; while for the assertion of prerogatives of official position it has less and less toleration. Is the minister of religion a priest because other men are not, or is he a priest just because others are? Is he different from them in kind, or is he what all others may be, not in occupation but in spirit? Has he official authority to forgive sins, and therefore to exact obedience; or is he in these respects representative of the priesthood of all believers? Questions such as these democracy has been calling on religion to answer. The presence of large numbers of intelligent and devout persons outside the churches shows that they reject the ecclesiastical answer, and, while still recognizing the sovereignty of religion, insist that its ministers do not constitute an aristocracy but are representative.

This same trend of thought has resulted in setting forth the object of religion as for the people. The necessity for machinery inevitably brought into existence ecclesiasticism. And ecclesiasticism did a service of great importance in building a fortress into which Christianity retreated, and where it remained in safety during the upheavals by which the ancient world passed into the modern. But the price paid by Christianity was high; for the Roman Empire and feudalism joined in stamping their

characteristic features upon the Church, and in getting both the Church and the world to acknowledge them as integral parts of the Christian religion. Ecclesiasticism, like a political party, has always tended to take itself too seriously, and to forget that its Master, the Son of Man, came not to be ministered unto but to minister. The effect of this serving of its own glory may be seen in that plainest instance in the modern world—the Ultramontane party in the Roman Catholic Church. The countries which a century ago, before democracy had found its tongue, were the most loyal to Rome, are today openly in revolt. And this, it may safely be said, is owing not so much to a rejection of the theology or the ritual of that Church as to the extreme ecclesiastical claims of Ultramontanism. It is pathetic to see that Rome's only answer to her sons' complaint that they have been chastised with whips, is that she will chastise them with scorpions.

In opposition to this claim of dominance, the demand is being made everywhere on the churches today that they shall justify their existence by their service to the needs of the world. The insistence that religion shall be practical often, indeed, leaves out of sight the important requirement that the Church shall do the world's religious thinking for it in religion and furnish it with moral steam-power. But the demand for service of some kind as a test of legitimacy and a condition of toleration is but an appeal to the canon our Lord established in His significant word "Because." "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me," He said, "*because* he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, and to set at liberty them that are bruised." It is only through such service that any one approves himself a messenger of God.

One of the most remarkable events of the last half-century has been the sweep through the world of socialism. With us in America the social consciousness is developing a higher social conscience than the world has ever known. Even Russia, the home of absolutism, has glowed with the spirit of brotherhood and martyrdom; and, though she fights against it with prisons and exile and death, she knows that she must eventually yield to the intangible, on-surg-ing, conquering tide. We may not

approve some of the theories of socialism nor some of the forms it takes; but we shall misunderstand one of the mighty forces of our generation and the next if we miss the connection between this and that spirit of brotherhood which our Lord prescribed as His test of discipleship: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples—if ye have love one toward another." The vision of a state of society where, when one member suffers all the members suffer with it, or when one member is honored all the members rejoice with it,—this ideal has by no means worked itself free from the limitations of trades-unionism and class-feeling; but it has received through them a mighty impetus, which it is imperative for the Church to recognize and welcome with outstretched hand. It is the suspicion that the Church is too much occupied with preserving her own class-prerogatives, which has alienated from her many who are stirred by this gospel of brotherhood. Said the late Bishop Potter of New York in his Convention Address of 1901, "The great fault with our Church today is that it has become too largely interested in its own organization, instead of being interested in the betterment of mankind."

However the Church may turn from socialism as a political theory, she will do well to listen with welcome to the call to brotherhood which social organizations are uttering, and, with an awakened sense of kinship, to respond to it, with King Saul, "Is this thy voice, my son David?"

Perhaps the greatest service democracy has done for religion is in transferring the conception of God from that of an arbitrary monarch to that of a constitutional ruler. The fundamental idea of a monarch in the ancient world was based on unrelated will. It was desirable indeed that a king or emperor should rule in accordance with such public opinion as existed, in the interest of his subjects, with justice and uprightness. But if he did so, it was a matter of grace, not of obligation, for which he was to be regarded as an exception and highly praised. His right was, so it was believed, to consider solely his own will, unrelated to anything else. When therefore this monarchical conception was applied to God, as all political conceptions were, it expressed each feature in a superlative degree. His power was omnipotent; He was under no obligations; His will was unrelated to anything

but itself. Such a conception inevitably developed a deity who was an oriental despot magnified. The centuries even down to our own have been darkened by the fear or the contempt of this arbitrary and therefore cruel divinity. Probably all of us have felt or seen the shadow of this thick darkness—the dread of the saint lest he may wake up after death and find that he was not after all one of the elect; the scorn of the thinker when assured that there is no certainty that what is reasonable to him is reasonable to God; the apparent divine sanction given to the mere worship of will and power. Humanity wants to be able to bring its best to God and say, “All mine are Thine, and Thine are mine.” As the spirit of democracy has spread, it has insisted that government must be constitutional; that there must be certain principles which it must follow, certain things it shall not do; that the will of those in power shall be related to the eternal laws of righteousness and the interests of the governed. This constitution may be written or unwritten, narrow or ample; but in all countries of the world the contest is going on today between will unrelated and will related. And so the spirit of the age has been applying its test to God Himself, and asking the patriarch’s question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” For even the Infinite Judge there is a code, and the standard to which the Divine will is brought to be judged is the Divine character. Because God can swear by no greater, He swears by Himself. We can no longer without a shock, which is deepest in the most devout, conceive of God as acting independently of right and wrong, or as making right and wrong by His mere fiat. We refuse to allow that He can damn an innocent soul, or that any act, wrong by the standard He has established for men, can be made out right because declared to have been done by Him. We hold Him, as it were, responsible before the bar of His own judgment. That moral sense which He has implanted in us must, we reverently claim, be the arbiter of His actions too. When the question arises, “Is God’s will founded upon His character, or His character upon His will?” the answer springs confidently to our lips, “The immutable will must rest upon the infinite righteousness.” Constitutional government has revealed to us the greater glory of will that is not arbitrary but is based upon and

responsible to something behind itself. The question, "Which is the more fundamental in God—His will or His character?" is of no trifling import. Does it make no difference whether I feel my path predestined by a mighty force, while I am powerless to turn or resist, or whether I believe it marked out by infinite wisdom and infinite love? whether the force which drives the world has behind it no rational and moral plan? From every one who has meditated with terror on the thought of an omnipotent Deity, not bound by the moral laws by which all men are bound, there will at once arise a cry, "It does make a difference! The centre of the Divine nature must be not in abstract will but in eternal righteousness."

For this thought of God, if again we may use the phrase with reverence, as a constitutional Ruler, we are largely indebted to the change throughout the world from absolute sovereignty to constitutional government.

I am inclined to think our age has gained from the doctrine of the divine immanence all that is at present possible for it, and can progress little further until it draws more upon the thought of the divine transcendence. Not that we shall return to painting the deity seated upon a throne in a distant heaven, issuing arbitrary decrees; but while recognizing the true voice of the soul as the voice of God, we must endue it with that majesty, that awe, that obedience-compelling strain, which were inspired by the clouds and darkness, the lightnings, the thunders, which surrounded the abode of Jahveh. It is only when we are filled with the conviction that the voice of the Lord is upon the waters and is full of majesty, that we are moved to give unto the Lord glory and strength, the glory due unto His name. Yet when the Divine voice is fully recognized within the soul, an imperative-ness will be found in it which no external fulminations can secure; or rather, the distinction between inward and outward revelation will have vanished, and the Kingdom of God will be real in the world because it is real in the hearts of men.